

a way of life

Mike Burns

1.

set above the flood plain
McKinleyville and Arcata straddle the Mad River
only farmers and their cattle
use these muddy lowlands

verdant green after the runoff.
before the flood, I climbed the train trestle
ran across, skipping tie to tie
the freight does not run North anymore

Union Pacific ripped up the old tracks
people built houses in the right-of-way
and Mr. Scarborough used the gravel bed
for a driveway

log racks scarred by chain binders and sloppy loader operators
a yellow and white '63 Peterbilt
sat in front of his red garage, with its leaky roof,
most the winter.

after school, we sat out front
Donny, Dave and I
perched on the round spool-like mill ends
watched the sun slip between clouds

we used to wash and wax his truck
Marine Corps shine
if the sun came out
his basement rootbeer was the best.

I drove through town last week.
from the overpass astride the new concrete ribbon of Highway
101
in the brief moment
before rain closed the sky

I could see the yellow fenders
but weeds grew
where the tires should have been.

2.

a broken gravel road
drifts through Magdalena
the wind stirs up dust clouds
that fan out
fill the cracked adobe walls

in the folds of a brief oasis
peasant grape vines
crouch, like wizened old men,
low against the rust hillside.

lone saguaro cactus
limbs heft upwards like Atlas
they keep the sky from collapsing
onto airless sand.
lizards and snakes and mexicans

live in this heat, on this edge
sun sharpened wind honed
razor to trim your beard
scrape the moss from your tin horn.

3.

I watched a fisherman cast his line
beyond the shore break.
a wave rose against his boulder perch
his figure obscured, for a moment,

by the mist.
a thousand feet over Mugu Rock
silver dish pushed into the sky.
a matched set of Navy choppers

spun above the storm waves kicked up by North Westerlies.
the current ran out his line
drop his hook on snag
that pulled like a 100 pounder.

4.

it's spring
before the first mosquitos
even before the mud begins to settle out
of the rivers and lakes
Chuck fries catfish in cornmeal batter

serves it up beside wilted spinach,
winter greens
and pie, baked with berries
gathered beneath the stone pilings of a trestle bridge
washed out

by the little Ohio in '64.
the sun sets early
and we finish the pie by kerosene lamp
hung from hooks
that will carry the mosquito netting in summer.